

4-1-1957

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Recommended Citation

Haefner, Marie. "Kate Harrington." *The Palimpsest* 38 (1957), 159-168.
Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol38/iss4/5>

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Kate Harrington

An American Lady

In the summer of 1856 the book stores of the "northwestern States" displayed a new novel by an Iowa author. "We are pleased to announce an Iowa book to the public — the first of a purely literary character, of any particular pretensions," wrote the editor of the *Des Moines Valley Whig*. Because it was in some respects a fictional reply to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the two books were frequently paired to encourage sales. In Keokuk the novel was announced with enthusiasm: "*Emma Bartlett, or Prejudice and Fanaticism*, for sale by Cave & Son. Fifty copies sold in one day!"

The title page of *Emma Bartlett* did not reveal who, by means of this novel, was presuming to expose the hypocrisy of Know-Nothingism and the dogmatism of Abolitionism. It was written simply by "An American Lady," and was dedicated to the "True Upholders of the Constitution and of the Union." According to a Keokuk newspaper, the author was "one whom we esteem and who is well known to the readers of this journal, to which she has contributed much and frequently under the *nom de plume* of 'Kate Harrington.' " That name was familiar beyond the boundaries of

Iowa. The editor of the *Louisville Journal* wrote that the young lady had lived in Kentucky, and that he had "known her for some years as a very charming writer."

Although the "American Lady" may have been widely known as Kate Harrington, neither the book nor the contemporary newspapers identified the author by her real name. The copyright notice alone afforded a clue to the authorship which the title page concealed. The novel, *Emma Bartlett*, was "entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1856, by R. H. Smith." Investigation would have revealed that R. H. Smith was in reality Miss Rebecca Harrington Smith, the "American Lady," who lived at Farmington, Iowa, and signed her newspaper articles and poems "Kate Harrington."

Rebecca Harrington Smith was born in Allegheny City, Pennsylvania, on September 20, 1831. Her father, Nathaniel Ruggles Smith, was a playwright and an authority on Shakespeare. His interpretations attracted the attention of John Wilkes Booth and the tragedian, Edwin Forrest, who came regularly to Pittsburgh to read with him. Both in Allegheny City and in Pittsburgh, Professor Smith taught in private schools; and in the former city he was editor of *The Hesperus*, a literary journal. Kirkham's *English Grammar*, whose pages Abraham Lincoln perused by candlelight, was based upon Professor Smith's method of presentation.

Eventually Nathaniel Smith with his wife and four children moved westward, settling first in Ohio, and then in Kentucky. It was at Crab Orchard, near Danville, Kentucky, that Rebecca, dark-haired, energetic, keen-witted, and kind-hearted, began her teaching career as a young girl in a fashionable school for girls. Her influence among Kentuckians, however, did not end with this experience. About thirty years later, while teaching in a private school in a fashionable district of Chicago, she lived and worked again among people whose names were familiar to her.

It was at Louisville, Kentucky, that her literary work began. There she was a contributor to the *Louisville Journal* — considered to be the best edited and most widely read newspaper in that region. George D. Prentice, whose opposition to secession had an important influence in keeping Kentucky from withdrawing from the Union, was the editor at that time. Through him, Rebecca Smith imbibed much of the spirit of Unionism, and through him she met Oliver I. Taylor, a New York poet and editor, whom she married in 1858 at Farmington, Iowa.

Her regular contributions to the *Journal* were entitled "Letters from a Prairie Cottage." She also conducted a children's corner, containing stories of the taming of wild animals; of raising domestic animals; of a cat that was taught to mother some orphan chicks.

After her marriage, she moved from Farmington to Keosauqua, where she and her husband edited a newspaper, the predecessor of the *State Line Democrat*. About a year later, Oliver I. Taylor purchased the Burlington *Argus*, and changed the name to *Gazette* at the suggestion of Mrs. Taylor. Wherever she lived, in Farmington, Keosauqua, Burlington, and later in Keokuk and Fort Madison, she was constantly called upon to write verses and special articles, often of a political nature, for the local papers. Her first collection of poems printed in book form was *Maymie*, published in 1869. It is a tribute to her ten-year-old daughter, who died in that year. Henry W. Longfellow, in one of his frequent letters to her, wrote that this poem "brought tears to my eyes."

After the death of Mr. Taylor, Rebecca Smith Taylor returned to Farmington where she devoted her time to teaching. Even after her second marriage in 1862 she continued in that work. James Pollard of Bloomfield, her second husband, seems to have had political ambitions. In 1862 he was elected to the State Senate, where he sat for one session in the seat of Cyrus Bussey, who was serving in the Union Army as colonel of the Third Iowa Volunteer Cavalry. Pollard's friends thought he was qualified for higher public offices. His political enemies pronounced him "the smartest man in Iowa and the biggest fool."

In her private schools at Farmington, Keokuk,

and Fort Madison, Mrs. Pollard developed unique methods of instructing small children. All the battles of the Revolutionary War were re-fought in the school yard. Broom-guns, blackboard-eraser pistols, the roll of the beating drum, served to revive the Spirit of '76 in 1876. "Tomorrow we are going to have Bunker Hill. Ralph is to be Warren and will speak: 'Stand! The ground's your own, my braves!'"

One of the children who attended that peculiar school writes: "We planted a garden each year and an extra one where we could pull up the plants to study how they grew. Botany was always studied out of doors and we could go out to the woods carrying picnic baskets of lunch and finally bringing them full of specimens we had gathered under her direction."

Who could forget volcanic action when a pot of boiling mush was prepared to illustrate it? Spilled milk was far from being a matter for tears. To seeing eyes there were created innumerable geographical formations — milky bays and peninsulas and islands, naturally distributed. Sand piles were used *during* school hours. Apples might be eaten in school, but they were divided, and so a lesson in fractions was simultaneously digested.

Out of her resourceful experience in teaching, Mrs. Pollard produced a series of spellers, readers, stencil pictures, and a teacher's manual. The "Pollard Series" was adopted in practically all

places where it was tried. Sarah Winter Kellogg at one time urged Mrs. Pollard to send someone to present her method of reading at a teachers' meeting. Miss Kellogg was at first chagrined when she met the tall representative, a Kentucky woman with a very noticeable accent, who was to illustrate the new way of learning to pronounce English. But she capitalized her own imperfections of diction and thus emphasized the virtues of Mrs. Pollard's system. "You will perceive befo' I have sayed ten words that my pronunciation an' my enunciation air incorrec'. I confess that at the staut — an' I explain that it is so because I did not learn to speak an' read English by the Pollud synthetic method. I stan' befo' you a livin' example of how the pronunciation an' the enunciation of a smart chil' may be spoiled for want of the Pollud. Take wahnin' by me, all you teachers, an' put the Pollud in you' schools."

Edward Everett Hale firmly championed Mrs. Pollard's methods. After an entire day with her, visiting in the suburbs of Boston where her system was used, he told her that the columns of his journal, *Lend a Hand*, were open to her at all times.

Although she was widely known in educational circles as Rebecca Pollard, her literary reputation pertains mainly to her earlier years when she was known as Rebecca Harrington Smith, or, more popularly, Kate Harrington. Nevertheless, she continued to write all her life — if not stories for

children, nature studies, or articles on current politics, then textbooks and poetry. Even in her eightieth year she produced a thirty-seven page poem, *Althea, or The Morning Glory*.

Kate Harrington, the poet, was keenly patriotic and sensitive to the beauties of nature. Rich in metaphor, her verse is full of rhythm and color. In an unpublished poem relating to Iowa these couplets appear:

Here we stand on a threshold with crystal inlaid —
Its mosaic of lakes, by Omnipotence made —
With the hearth-light of sun in the azure-arched door,
And the Prairie beyond with its emerald floor.

During her later years she wrote many hymns. Ira D. Sankey, the evangelist, encouraged her in this work. Her *Songs of the Red Ribbon Club*, written in the cause of temperance, were widely used. It was probably her interest in religious matters which led to the frequent confusion of her identity with that of Josephine Pollard, a New York author who wrote chiefly on religious topics.

Although a Presbyterian, she staunchly defended Catholicism against Know-Nothingism. The religious intolerance of the period before the Civil War she thought was only one manifestation of a general social attitude that was rooted in prejudice and fanaticism. Her political and social views were already pronounced at the age of twenty-five when her most notable book, *Emma Bartlett*, was published.

Having lived both in the North and the South, she felt qualified to judge the temper of the people in both sections. During the impressionable period of her girlhood in Kentucky she formed her views of social and political affairs. And like most people of her class and character, she learned to take politics and religion very seriously. While her home was in Louisville she was associated with slave owners who treated their Negroes with kindness. "Aunt" Theodocia was a trusted member of her own household. It was out of this experience that she produced *Emma Bartlett*.

The contemporary opinion of this book was both favorable and unfavorable. "We noticed, some weeks ago, that a new work, in the style of a novel, on the exciting and immediate political themes of the day, by a lady well known, by her excellent contributions to American literature, was in press," wrote a reviewer in the *Ohio Statesman* on July 3, 1856. "It is a book of 500 pages, very neatly printed and bound, the leading feature of which is an exposition of political and religious prejudice and fanaticism as seen in Abolitionism, Know Nothingism, and kindred heresies. The great and alarming evils of these popular delusions are depicted principally in the social and domestic circles, and though the characters are fictitious in name we do not doubt that the fair authoress has had living originals in her eye, as the characters are life-like and true delineations of personages

who figure, some of them very conspicuously, at the present day and hour. The heroine, Emma Bartlett, is the off-spring of a young and lively German woman, who is driven, with her relatives, by political and religious persecution, from her own land, to seek a home in America. From the hour of her birth, which is the result of a cunning plan of deception contrived by one who disgraces the name of an 'American,' to the moment she returns to her native land to die, she illustrates through a succession of thrilling scenes, the character of a gentle, noble and gifted woman, suffering from the evils with which a corrupt social system, and an unwise and unjust proscription have surrounded her."

Nevertheless, the book was not received with unanimous approval. "We have read this book," wrote a critic in the *Cincinnati Times*, "and while we pronounce the plot an excellent one, and the style of the authoress charming in many respects, we must say that she has failed to fulfill the intended mission of the book. In the selection of her characters and the language she gives them, she exhibits all the prejudice and fanaticism of that class of politicians she attempts to defend, and it is evident that her knowledge of political life, of political movements, and of political sentiments among her countrymen is far short of what is required in the construction of a stirring, effective

political romance. Nevertheless, 'Emma Bartlett' has its merits, and will no doubt have a large sale."

This reply to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is unknown to the present generation. Few copies are available, even in the large libraries of the country. Yet some people, particularly in southeastern Iowa, not only knew Rebecca Smith Pollard, even as Kate Harrington, but also cherish recollections of her novel. Three children of Mrs. Pollard remember well the "American Lady," who died but recently, on May 29, 1917, at the home of her son in Fort Madison, Iowa. She was a woman who presented observations "with an air of naiveté, impregnated with knowledge and worldly shrewdness, while, womanlike, she looked kindly upon the errors and wickedness of mankind — trying with a pleasing singleness of heart to palliate the very faults she exposed."

MARIE HAEFNER